
THE PATH OF THE *ARGO*

Language, imagery and narrative in the *Argonautica*
of Apollonius Rhodius

R. J. CLARE

University of Leeds



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Faculty of Classics, University of Cambridge 2002

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Times 11/13 pt. *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Clare, R. J.

The path of the Argo: language, imagery, and narrative in the Argonautica of
Apollonius Rhodius / R. J. Clare.

p. cm. – (Cambridge classical studies)

Includes bibliographical references (p. 286) and index.

ISBN 0 521 81036 1

1. Apollonius, Rhodius. Argonautica. 2. Greek language, Hellenistic
(300 BC–600 AD) – Figures of speech. 3. Greek poetry, Hellenistic – History
and criticism. 4. Epic poetry, Greek – History and criticism. 5. Argonauts
(Greek mythology) in literature. 6. Jason (Greek mythology) in literature. 7. Medea
(Greek mythology) in literature. 8. Narration (Rhetoric). 9. Rhetoric, Ancient.
I. Title. II. Series.

PA3872.Z4 C55 2002

883'.01 – dc21

2001037379

ISBN 0 521 81036 1 hardback

CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	page ix
<i>Note on texts, translations and abbreviations</i>	x
Introduction	I
Part I There and back again	
1 Epic beginnings	9
2 Outward bound	33
3 Other journeys	84
4 Homeward bound	119
Part II Order and disorder	
5 Patterns of action	175
6 Orpheus and Medea	231
7 Poetics and rhetoric	261
<i>Bibliography</i>	286
<i>Passages discussed</i>	294
<i>General index</i>	298

I

EPIC BEGINNINGS

Some beginnings have a certain amount of inevitability attached to them.¹ The classical epic tradition as established and exemplified by the Homeric poems and the epic cycle demands that the parameters of epic be declared in advance. According to this model of beginning the epic proem is constituted as the place of overall thematic clarification, the occasion upon which the poet gives notice of the major issues inspiring his work. Consequently, our first task in reading the *Argonautica* of Apollonius will be to establish the ways in which the poem's opening relates to and prefigures the action of the remainder of this epic. At the same time, however, one may reasonably look to the beginning of Apollonius' poem for indications of how the poet defines his work in relation to the epic tradition.² The *Argonautica* is written in the knowledge that, for any epic whose chosen theme is the representation of the heroic quest, the exemplarity of the travels of Odysseus as narrated in the *Odyssey* hovers ever in the background and often in the foreground. This is an aspect of Apollonius' poem which has been explored on many occasions by many critics, and will necessarily inform many of the discussions in this book. Less obvious is the extent to which the intertextuality between the two poems begins at the very beginning. The opening of the *Odyssey* is of fundamental importance for the appreciation of Apollonius' strategies of beginning, and so it will be useful if we explore beforehand some of the complexities inherent in the opening verses of Homer's poem.

Odyssean beginnings

At first sight it might seem as if the proem to the *Odyssey* is a model of transparency. As is also true of the *Iliad*, the opening

¹ On beginnings in Greek poetry see Race (1992) 13–36. Also Conte (1992) 147–9.

² Cf. Goldhill (1991) 285–6.

of the *Odyssey* exhibits precision of expression to such an extent that the act of beginning is accomplished with ultimate speed and directness: crucial thematic information is conveyed in the first word of the first verse.³ The fragmentary evidence of the cyclical poems reinforces the uniqueness of the Homeric poems in this regard. Both the *Thebaid* (**Ἄργος** ἄειδε, θεά, πολυδίψιον, ἔνθεν ἄνακτες) and the *Little Iliad* (**Ἰλίων** ἀείδω καὶ Δαρδανίην ἑύπωλον) begin with equally emphatic nouns, but these are intimations of geographical location, rather than concise expressions of theme.⁴

Although the declaration of theme may be the most overt function of the epic proem, there are other no less important functions to be considered. The beginning of an epic, as indeed of any narrative, is a complex transaction between author and reader or audience, a moment of maximum potentiality, a process of orientation in space, time and action. The reader or audience is entirely dependent upon the author for the provision of a frame within which that which is to be narrated may be understood. For example, there are legitimate expectations that a setting for the action will be established and, also, a point in time denoted, at least on a provisional basis, from which the events of the action may unfold. The manner and extent to which such expectations are fulfilled can be in itself an invaluable insight into the text in question.

Mention of expectations brings me to my first fundamental point: we sometimes forget the importance of the blank canvas. As we shall see, many of the subtle effects achieved by epic beginnings depend upon the impartiality of an implied first-time reader or audience. Our overall recursive, scholarly knowledge of an epic text and the familiarity of the tale told within it may blind us to the significance of the epic prologue, misleading us as to what exactly the prologue does say, delays in saying, or indeed avoids completely; there must be a willingness on our part both to activate and set aside such foreknowledge, as appropriate.

Brief consideration of the prologue to the *Iliad* will provide an excellent illustration of what I mean. The *Iliad* can at times be problematic because of the paucity of its spatial referents and the

³ See Pucci (1982) 39.

⁴ Davies (1989) 24.

intermittent difficulty experienced by the reader or audience in placing the events of the action within an appropriate visual context. This is a difficulty which may be traced back to the opening of the epic. Though we may take it for granted, it is remarkable that at the beginning of the *Iliad* the Trojan setting remains unmentioned until verse 19, even then only being glossed periphrastically as Πρίαμοιο πόλιν in the speech of one of the characters. Up to this point the only locative designation has been an incidental reference to the ships of the Greeks (12). Instead the opening of the poem concentrates upon the theme of anger and the identification of the two principal protagonists implicated in this theme: Agamemnon is mentioned for the first time and Achilles for the second in the seventh verse. Verses 8–12 elaborate upon the theme of anger by dealing with the initial generative cause, the pestilential punishment inflicted upon the Greeks by Apollo for the dishonour done to Chryses, yet it is retrospectively made clear by the explanatory ὁ γὰρ ἦλθε in verse 12 that this too has been a proleptic view of the action; the true beginning of the sequence of events narrated in this poem is actually Chryses' original embassy to the Greeks. The combined effect of this spatial uncertainty and temporal regression generates a curious mix of clarity and confusion; with the bare minimum of introduction one finds oneself finally and abruptly in mid-action from verse 17 onwards, the scene being that of the priest's plea to the Greek leaders.⁵

The beginning of the *Odyssey* is no less complex. For the purposes of this discussion I shall examine the first twenty-one verses of the poem, as it is only by that stage that the preview of the forthcoming narrative is complete. In the opening five verses the essentials of what is about to be narrated are outlined as follows:

Ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, Μοῦσα, πολύτροπον, ὃς μάλα πολλὰ
πλάγχθη, ἐπεὶ Τροίης ἱερὸν πτολίεθρον ἔπερσε·
πολλῶν δ' ἀνθρώπων ἴδεν ἄστεα καὶ νόον ἔγνω,
πολλὰ δ' ὃ γ' ἐν πόντῳ πάθεν ἄλγεα ὃν κατὰ θυμόν,
ἀρνύμενος ἥν τε ψυχὴν καὶ νόστον ἐταίρων. (*Od.* 1.1–5)

⁵ Andersson (1976) 16.

Muse, tell me of the man of many turns, who wandered very many ways,
 after he had sacked the sacred citadel of Troy;
 he saw the cities of many men and learned their mind,
 and he suffered many woes in his heart upon the sea,
 striving to secure his own life and the return of his comrades.

As has frequently been commented upon, this poem begins with a lacuna, ever more perceptible as verse succeeds verse. The resonance of the *Odyssey's* first word draws attention to the theme of identity, but the hero of the tale is unnamed.⁶ Paradoxically, in such a situation less can also be more. The absence of the name focusses attention on other means of identification, and one clue is immediately forthcoming: this is a man who is πολύτροπον. As critics are quick to point out, however, this epithet is indefinite, either providing psychological insight into the anonymous hero, or previewing the arduous physical journey specified in the succeeding verses, or perhaps both.⁷

It is obvious from the beginning of the *Odyssey* that the unnamed man is important not just because of who he is, but also because of where he goes, as the principal emphasis of the first five verses is upon the delineation of the epic journey undertaken by him. The first verb attached to the hero, πλάγχθη, categorises him definitively as a wanderer, while the deceptively simple clause ἐπεὶ Τροίης ἱερὸν πτολίεθρον ἔπερσε supplies temporal specifications for the action as taking place in the aftermath of the siege of Troy, and implicitly nominates that city as the geographical beginning of the nameless man's wanderings. Assertion of the hero as a veteran of the Trojan war, one who sacked the city, narrows the range of identificatory possibilities: more than one Greek hero, but not many more, could fit such a description.

More important is realisation of the vagueness of the geographical itinerary provided. Indeed Troy, the crucial location missing from the proem to the *Iliad*, is the only geographical benchmark

⁶ On the lack of the name see e.g. Austin (1972) 9–10; Clay (1983) 26–9; Pedrick (1992) 45–6; Pucci (1982) 49–50; Rüter (1969) 34–9 (with bibliographical footnotes). On the ambiguities of ἄνδρα see Goldhill (1991) 1–5.

⁷ On the disputed meaning of πολύτροπον here see West (in Heubeck, West and Hainsworth (1988)) *ad loc.* Also Chantraine (1968–80) 927; Clay (1983) 29–33; Detienne and Vernant (1978) 39–43; Goldhill (1991) 3–4; Pedrick (1992) 46; Pucci (1982) 50–7.

supplied. The sack of Troy, in mythological terms the symbol for the end of so many things, here marks the beginning of a new sequence of action, a journey with a plurality of paths and destinations, a sequel of some sort to the events narrated in the *Iliad*. No more specificity is attached to the location of such wanderings than a general reference to the cities of many men (3), and the designation of the sea (4) as the theatre of action for much of the hero's experience. The goal or purpose of the unnamed man's journey is unclear until the fifth verse, whereupon, though no specific final destination is mentioned, there is a general statement of the hero's seeking to gain his own life and a return (νόστον) for his comrades.

By means of the combined references to *wandering* in the second verse and to *return* in the fifth, the nature of the hero's epic journey begins, at last, to acquire definition. Dominant vectors pertaining to the voyage are established, and one of the poem's defining polarities is articulated for the first time. It is a somewhat more ambiguous polarity, however, than might at first appear to be the case. Here one may import the evidence of the *Odyssey* as a whole. On numerous occasions various speakers offer, directly or indirectly, their opinion of the wandering lifestyle, opinions which are uniformly negative. Notable among such occasions is Nestor's inquisition of Telemachus at Pylos, by means of which the king attempts to ascertain the provenance of his visitors:

Strangers, who are you? Whence do you come over the watery paths?
Is it on some business or do you wander aimlessly
over the sea, like pirates, who wander
venturing their lives and bringing evil to men of other lands? (*Od.* 3.71–4)

In this formulaic sequence (repeated in the *Cyclopeia*, where, in the voice of Polyphemus, it takes on distinctly aggressive overtones)⁸ wandering is established as the opposite of legitimate activity and construed as synonymous with piracy, a low occupation which inflicts misfortune on others.

Also important is Menelaus' account in book 4 of his own homecoming. Out of all the *nostoi* only the experience of the Spartan king is comparable in difficulty to that of Odysseus, both in duration

⁸ On the textual controversy pertaining to this repetition see West (in H., W., & H. (1988)) *ad* 3.71–4.

and in itinerary, to the extent that Menelaus' homecoming may also be said to be an epic journey. In Menelaus' summary of his own endeavours we find the blueprint for an epic quest, pared down to its bare essentials:

ἦ γὰρ πολλὰ παθὼν καὶ πόλλ' ἐπαληθεὶς
ἤγαγόμεν ἐν νηυσὶ καὶ ὁγδοάτῳ ἔτει ἦλθον· (*Od.* 4.81–2)

For indeed after much suffering and much wandering
I brought home my wealth in ships, coming back in the eighth year.

Travel and travail are here inextricably linked: in his prefatory gloss of the story of his homecoming Menelaus speaks of suffering and wandering in the same breath. Likewise later in the poem Odysseus himself, in conversation with Eumaeus, articulates a more sympathetic attitude to the wandering state than that implied by Nestor's questions, whereby the wanderer is more to be pitied than feared:

πλαγκτοσύνης δ' οὐκ ἔστι κακώτερον ἄλλο βροτοῖσιν·
ἀλλ' ἔνεκ' οὐλομένης γαστρὸς κακὰ κήδε' ἔχουσιν
ἄνδρες, ὃν τιν' ἴκηται ἄλη καὶ πῆμα καὶ ἄλγος. (*Od.* 15.343–5)

There is no worse evil for mortal men than wandering;
but because of their cursed bellies men endure evil woes,
when wandering and misery and suffering come to them.

Odysseus speaks from his own immediate experience in this gnomic utterance, insisting that there is no greater evil inflicted upon mankind than that of wandering, a condition synonymous with misfortune and suffering. In this regard his comments may be usefully contrasted with his assertion of the positive attributes of home, than which nothing is sweeter, as elucidated in the famous description at the beginning of his Phaeacian narrative (*Od.* 9.28, 9.34).

Yet all experiences, even negative experiences, can potentially be construed as valuable. Despite Menelaus' sober introduction to the events of his homecoming, later on the king appears to impute one positive outcome to his ordeal – his knowledge of the minds of men may be directly attributed to the extensive travel forced upon him:

EPIC BEGINNINGS

ἤδη μὲν πολέων ἐδάην βουλήν τε νόον τε
ἀνδρῶν ἡρώων, πολλήν δ' ἐπελήλυθα γαῖαν· (Od. 4.267–8)

Before now I have learned the counsel and the mind
of many heroes, and have traversed the wide earth.

Let us now return to consideration of the beginning of the poem. In the opening verses of the *Odyssey* may be found the earliest assertion in western literature of the aphorism that travel broadens the mind. No less significant than the hero's designation as the man in search of a homecoming is the fact that he is the man ὅς μάλα πολλὰ | πλάγχθη. Though it is true that the hero suffers by virtue of his nomadic status (πάθεν, 4), it is equally true that he acquires knowledge as a result of his adventures (ἶδεν, ἔγνων, 3). Indeed verse 3 appears to function as the positive counterpart of, or offer some compensation for, the woes specified in the following verse. The unnamed man's epic journey may be interpreted as a process of recovery of the familiar through the filtering medium of return, but there is also discovery of the new, through the totality of the epic journey he accomplishes. The *Odyssey*, which through the resonance of its first word encourages us to concentrate on the identity of an individual man, will explore or establish the nature of that identity not only in terms of a journey homewards, but also in terms of the outward-looking quest for knowledge on the part of the hero, and the wondrous itinerary compassed by him.⁹ In short, in the *Odyssey* proem wandering and return are construed as dual aspects of a single experience, and one should not attempt to dissociate them from one another.

After the initial statement of theme in the opening five verses, the central part of the introduction affords the first insight into the events of the hero's journey, in glimpses which are redolent of disillusionment, divine retribution and hindrance:

ἀλλ' οὐδ' ὥς ἐτάρους ἐρρύσατο, ἰέμενός περ·
αὐτῶν γὰρ σφετέρῃσιν ἀτασθαλίῃσιν ὄλοντο,
νήπιοι, οἳ κατὰ βοῦς Ὑπερίονος Ἥελίοιο
ἦσθιον· αὐτὰρ ὁ τοῖσιν ἀφείλετο νόστιμον ἦμαρ.

⁹ Cf. Whitman (1958) 297.

THERE AND BACK AGAIN

τῶν ἀμόθεν γε, θεά, θύγατερ Διός, εἰπὲ καὶ ἡμῖν.
Ἔνθ' ἄλλοι μὲν πάντες, ὅσοι φύγον αἰπὺν ὄλεθρον,
οἴκοι ἔσαν, πόλεμόν τε πεφευγότες ἤδ' ἑτάλασαν·
τὸν δ' οἶον, νόστου κεχρημένον ἤδ' ἑταίρος,
νύμφη πότνι' ἔρυκε Καλυψώ, δῖα θεάων,
ἐν σπέσσι γλαφυροῖσι, λιλαιομένη πόσιν εἶναι. (*Od.* 1.6–15)

But even so he did not save his comrades, though much desiring to do so;
for they perished through their own recklessness,
fools, who devoured the cattle of Helios Hyperion;
and the god took away from them their day of return.
Of these things, Goddess, daughter of Zeus, tell us also, taking it up from where
you wish.

Now all the others, those who escaped utter destruction,
were back at home, having escaped both the war and the sea;
but him alone, yearning for his homecoming and his wife,
the august nymph Calypso, goddess of goddesses, detained
in her hollow caves, longing for him to be her husband.

This section of the poem's introduction provides clarification, explanation and, in some measure, complication of what has gone before. In the first place the outcome of one of the aspirations attributed to the hero in verse 5 is immediately signalled in 6–9. The man fails completely in one of the primary aims alleged for him: despite his own aspirations he is unable to save the lives of his comrades, who are lethally punished by Helios for their reckless devouring of his cattle. Yet although this would appear straightforward enough, it is not an accurate preview of their fate as narrated by Odysseus himself, being at best a simplification and at worst a distortion of what takes place; the majority of Odysseus' men actually die at the hands of the Laestrygonians.¹⁰ For the sophisticated reader or audience familiar with the detail of the entire poem, this is perhaps the first indication of the *Odyssey's* preoccupation with the intricacies of tale-telling, the way in which truth may be massaged to fit the demands of context, in this instance condemnation of the hero's comrades.

Verse 10 hands over responsibility for deciding the beginning of the story to the Muse. In the complex politics of beginning

¹⁰ See West (in H., W., & H. (1988)) *ad* 1.7–9.

this verse fulfils at least three functions: acknowledgement that the narrative proper has not yet begun; admission that there are many points in the story which could constitute an appropriate beginning;¹¹ indication that this verse in fact marks the start of the narrative.¹² The last is made immediately apparent by the clause introduced by 'Ενθ' in the succeeding verse, offering a second temporal orientation of events to follow on from verse 2, but still not fixing the timescale with any degree of exactness. This, however, is as accurate as the poet intends to be for the moment; it is not until 2.175 that Odysseus' twenty-year absence is mentioned for the first time.

Juxtaposed with the earlier preview of the doomed homeward journey of the hero's comrades is a reference to the homecomings of those who are destined to return from the war in safety (11–12). Verse 13 marks a shift of emphasis: at this point in the proceedings, after intimations of returns both successful and unsuccessful (and all, in any case, already decided one way or another), it is specifically stated that the (still) unidentified man is desirous of his own return, νόστου κεχρημένον. Strictly speaking verse 5 did not *actually* say as much, despite its inevitable implications: the mention of *nostos* in that verse portrayed the hero only as desirous of the return of his comrades. From now on, the emphasis is solely on the fate of the individual.¹³

The motivation driving the anonymous man is also modified: he is pining not only for a homecoming, but for a reunion with his wife. Mention of the hero's spouse followed by identification of the nymph Calypso transforms our entire perception of the epic voyage as so far outlined. It now becomes clear that others besides the man himself have a vested interest in the accomplishment of this journey, and another motive antagonistic to that of the hero is revealed, explaining to some extent the delay in the outcome, successful or otherwise, of this particular *nostos*. Calypso, wishing to appropriate him as her husband, detains a married man who longs for his wife.

¹¹ On the temporal indications provided in the first ten verses see Pedrick (1992) 49.

¹² Race (1992) 21. ¹³ Cf. Bassett (1923) 342.

The remaining six verses of the introduction prior to the first proper episode of the action offer further insight into the nature of this epic journey:

ἀλλ' ὅτε δὴ ἔτος ἦλθε περιπλομένων ἐνιαυτῶν,
τῷ οἱ ἐπεκλώσαντο θεοὶ οἰκόνδε νέεσθαι
εἰς Ἰθάκην, οὐδ' ἔνθα πεφυγμένος ἦεν ἀέθλων,
καὶ μετὰ οἷσι φίλοισι. θεοὶ δ' ἐλέαιρον ἅπαντες
νόσφι Ποσειδάωνος· ὁ δ' ἀσπερχὲς μενέαινε
ἀντιθέω Ὀδυσῆϊ πάρος ἦν γαῖαν ἰκέσθαι. (*Od.* 1.16–21)

But when the year came, as time rolled on,
in which the gods had willed that he should return home
to Ithaca, not even then was he free from trials,
and among his own folk. And all the gods had pity on him
except for Poseidon; he was unceasingly angry towards
godlike Odysseus until he reached his homeland.

No sooner has the aspiration of Calypso been succinctly expressed in the final three words of verse 15 than it is summarily dismissed, the ἀλλ' at the beginning of verse 16 performing much the same function as the ἀλλ' at the beginning of the sixth verse. Because it is contrary to the will of the other gods, the goddess Calypso will not achieve her purpose. In verse 17 the destined success of the hero's homecoming is finally admitted, in accordance with a divine plan introduced as a function of time by the preceding verse. This third temporal designation of the action provides little by way of temporal clarification except to hint at a lengthy passage of time since the Trojan war, and its principal function is rather to reveal the delay in the accomplishment of *nostos* as being in fulfilment of a divine plan much larger than the parochial ambitions of Calypso. An ancillary consequence is to emphasise the removal of uncertainty concerning the hero's fate; this is a man whose destiny, from the beginning, has never really been open to question.

Further revelations follow thick and fast. An ultimate destination for the voyage is finally made manifest in verse 18. It is important to remember that the withholding of the name of Ithaca is no less crucial for the reading of the prologue than the withholding of the name of Odysseus. The postponement of nomination of destination

to this relatively late stage has done much to accentuate the freedom and randomness of the hero's itinerary as expounded in the opening five verses. Yet at the same time that the name of Ithaca is revealed, there is further insight in verses 18–19 into the ongoing (or, less probably, the future)¹⁴ fraught circumstances of the hero: nothing is over until it is over.

Mention of his homeplace is the penultimate stage in identification of the man, and the hero himself is formally named as Odysseus in verse 21. Before that, however, the existence of a formidable divine adversary in the person of Poseidon is revealed. There are exceptions to every rule, and the highly effective caveat νόσφι in verse 20 means that our perspective on events must needs change yet again. Though the fate of Odysseus is pointed up as a matter of general divine concern (19), the concern is not all on the hero's behalf. Until now, the only divine wrath referred to has been that of Helios, but it has been made abundantly clear what such divine hostility can mean. The final introductory disclosure, that of Poseidon's personal anger towards the man, means that we are invited to reinterpret verse 4 in an altogether more sinister sense; the hero's maritime sufferings may not be quite so gratuitous as they first appear. But potentially most disturbing of all is the generation of another information lacuna. Though we have been carefully apprised of the reason why Odysseus' men fall foul of Helios, Poseidon's anger towards their leader appears as unexplained as it is relentless.

To sum up, the beginning of Homer's *Odyssey* proves to be a remarkably involved and elusive introduction to the epic. These opening twenty-one verses previewing the epic voyage are rendered distinctive through the existence of a number of inner tensions, vacillation between intimations of failure and success, and competition between mutually exclusive motivations tied into the accomplishment or otherwise of the journey. The sequence of thought is structured around a number of polarities.¹⁵ First there is the conflict between interpretation of the voyage as a series of wanderings and a homecoming. The unsuccessful fate of Odysseus' men

¹⁴ See e.g. Pedrick (1992) 57; West (in H., W., & H. (1988)) *ad* 1.18–19.

¹⁵ Compare the polarities identified by Pedrick (1992) 53.

is then measured against other unspecified *nostoi*. Juxtaposition of γυναικός at the end of 13 and νύμφη at the beginning of the following verse underpins the presentation of Penelope and Calypso as rivals for the affections of the hero.¹⁶ The contrasting choices facing Odysseus are reinforced in the contrast between the mysterious, unlocated abodes of the goddess (ἐν σπέσσι γλαφυροῖσι, 15) and the clearly but belatedly asserted destination of Ithaca three verses later. Calypso's aspirations are opposed to the wishes of the divine majority, but these wishes are in their turn gainsaid by the malevolent Poseidon, on the evidence of the prologue a far greater threat to the welfare of the hero than the nymph.

Furthermore, it is fair to say that the beginning of this epic problematises as much as it elucidates. A series of revelations is provided, the timing of which is carefully designed so as to manipulate reader or audience expectation. There is blatant postponement in the transmission of essential information, the absence of which gives scope for potential misconceptions. Most important of all, what the beginnings of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have most in common is that neither provides a comprehensive overview of the entire epic. The opening of the *Odyssey* is notably reticent and selective in that the entire second half of the poem is ignored.¹⁷ There is no mention at all of the predatory suitors, and aside from the ambiguous interpretation of verses 18 and 19 referred to earlier, a reader or audience unfamiliar with Odysseus' story might legitimately construe the closing words of verse 21 (πάρῳς ἦν γαῖαν ἰκέσθαι) as foreshadowing the point at which the poem will end.

Argonautic beginnings

As I have already intimated, that there exists an ongoing dialogue between the *Argonautica* of Apollonius Rhodius and the *Odyssey* is hardly a surprise. It is a dialogue the beginnings of which are apparent in the opening verses of the *Argonautica*. The introduction to

¹⁶ See West (in H., W., & H. (1988)) *ad* 1.13. Also Pedrick (1992) 54–5.

¹⁷ See e.g. Pedrick (1992) 39; Pucci (1987) 232; Rutherford (1991–3) 43; West (in H., W., & H. (1988)) *ad* 1.1–10.

Apollonius' poem is no less intricate than that of the Homeric epic, and for the purposes of this discussion I shall treat the first twenty-two verses as a self-contained unit. The Hellenistic epic opens with a very powerful image, that of the ship *Argo* plying its way:

Ἀρχόμενος σέο, Φοῖβε, παλαιγενέων κλέα φωτῶν
μνήσομαι οἱ Πόντοιο κατὰ στόμα καὶ διὰ πέτρας
Κυανέας βασιλῆος ἐφημοσύνη Πελῖας
χρῦσειον μετὰ κῶας ἐύζυγον ἤλασαν Ἀργώ. (1.1–4)

Beginning from you, Phoebus, the famous deeds of men of old
I shall recall, who down through the mouth of Pontus and through
the Cyanean Rocks, at the behest of King Pelias
in quest of the Golden Fleece drove well-benched *Argo*.

The first point to be made is an obvious one. While Apollonius' choice to begin this epic with a participle of beginning (Ἀρχόμενος) may lack directness and transparency in comparison to the precision of the Homeric epics, it is indubitably a powerful exercise in self-reflexivity; the beginning of this particular narrative straightaway draws attention to itself both *in* the act of beginning, and *as* an act of beginning.¹⁸

The theme of beginning is also overt in the literary allusions to be found in the opening verses. Although the primary influence is hymnic in origin,¹⁹ recent critics have also pointed up an allusion to the beginning of a song by Homer's bard Demodocus at the court of King Alcinous.²⁰ In obedience to a request from Odysseus to sing of the wooden horse of Troy, Demodocus obliges with his third song of the evening:

ὥς φάθ', ὃ δ' ὀρμηθεὶς θεοῦ ἄρχετο, φαῖνε δ' ἀοιδήν,
ἔνθεν ἑλὼν ὥς οἱ μὲν εὖσσέλμων ἐπὶ νηῶν
βάντες ἀπέπλειον. (*Od.* 8.499–501)

¹⁸ On poetic self-consciousness in the *Argonautica* see e.g. Albis (1996); Beye (1982) 1–38; DeForest (1994) 4–11; Fusillo (1985) 360–85; Goldhill (1991) 284–333; Hunter (1993) 101.

¹⁹ See Σ *ad* 1.4a (Wendel (1958) 7). Also Albis (1996) 7; Ardizzoni (1967) *ad* 1.1; Beye (1982) 13–14; Bundy (1972) 58; Clauss (1993) 16; Goldhill (1991) 287; Händel (1954) 9; Herter (1944–55) 336–7; Hunter (1996) 46; Levin (1971a) 11; De Marco (1963) 351–2; Mooney (1912) *ad* 1.1; Race (1992) 26–7; Vian (1974) 50 n.1; Williams (1991) 301–3.

²⁰ See Hunter (1993) 121–2. Also Albis (1996) 17–19. Albis' identification of an allusion to *Od.* 8.73 is less convincing.

So Odysseus spoke; and Demodocus, inspired by the god, began, and set forth
his song,
taking it up from where the Greeks, embarking on their well-benched ships,
sailed away.

As Hunter has shown, there are numerous ways in which both the figure of Demodocus and the content of his song are of relevance to the concerns of the *Argonautica* proem. What is most interesting for our purposes is that Apollonius evokes the literary model of a bard who begins a story by picking it up at a precise point in the tale, a story and strategy which, it is implied by ἐνθεν ἑλὼν ὥς, would be familiar to Demodocus' audience. *Inter alia* therefore, the Homeric allusion subtly raises the question of whether a comparably suitable beginning may be found for Apollonius' poem, on the general principle that certain stories have built into them appropriate points of commencement.

Before any further comment, let us consider in exact detail what may be gleaned in the way of information about the poem from these opening verses of the *Argonautica*. In a general sense it is true to say that Apollonius follows the precedent of Homer in his economical assertion of theme, the epic journey which is to be his subject being outlined in four verses, one fewer than the *Odyssey*. And, as with the *Odyssey*, the initial statement of the theme of epic voyaging fulfils a second, practical function, in that the earliest spatial designations of the poem are tied in to the specific route of the journey. From the very commencement of the epic there is at least as much emphasis upon where the Argonauts travel as on what they accomplish. Lastly, a measure of temporal orientation is also provided, though the reference to παλαιγενέων κλέα φωτῶν is even more imprecise than Homer's reference to the aftermath of the Trojan war.²¹

But comparison of the respective proems of the *Odyssey* and the *Argonautica* also reveals major differences between the two poems, differences which may be classified under the respective headings of identity and itinerary. Unlike the *Odyssey*, which takes the voyage of the individual as its main theme, Apollonius focusses

²¹ On the function of this phrase in locating the poem within the epic tradition of Homer see Albis (1996) 17; Beye (1969) 35; Conte (1986) 72; Goldhill (1991) 287–8.

from the outset on the Argonauts as a collective entity;²² the prominently placed οἱ in the second verse of the *Argonautica* appears to be both a response and a challenge to the equally emphatic ὃς in the first verse of Homer's epic. In the *Odyssey* the existence of the hero's comrades is not revealed until verse 5. In the *Argonautica* the order is reversed; Jason will not be singled out for individual attention until verse 8.

Furthermore Apollonius' prescription for the epic voyage is in fact markedly different from Homer's, in that the itinerary specified for *Argo* is more measured than that of Odysseus. No point of embarkation for the Argonauts is mentioned, nor even a destination, but the journey itself is oriented in a very precise and narrowly defined direction, down through the mouth of Pontus and between the Cyanean rocks. In other words there is no geographical vagueness of the wandering variety as highlighted in the *Odyssey* proem. Accordingly, one reading of the first four verses of the *Argonautica* in the context of Homeric models might be to suggest that the uncertainty, randomness and suffering of the Odyssean blueprint of epic voyaging are inapplicable to the circumstances of the quest for the Golden Fleece. Whereas Odysseus, at least in the opening verses of Homer's poem, appears to be something of a victim of circumstances, the Argonauts are working under compulsion, with a fixed end in view.

Though the *Argonautica* may be said to begin by implying a measure of difference between itself and the *Odyssey*, the intertextual relationship between the two poems undergoes modification as the *Argonautica* proem progresses. Verses 5–17 recount King Pelias' encounter with the man of one sandal:²³

Τοῖην γὰρ Πελῆϊς φάτιν ἔκλυεν, ὥς μιν ὀπίσσω
μοῖρα μένει στυγερή, τοῦδ' ἀνέρος ὃν τιν' ἴδοιτο
δημόθεν οἰοπέδιλον ὑπ' ἐννεσίησι δαμῆναι.
Δηρὸν δ' οὐ μετέπειτα τήν κατὰ βᾶξιν Ἰήσων,
χειμερίοιο ῥέεθρα κιῶν διὰ ποσσὶν Ἀναύρου,

²² Some critics would go even further than this: 'It would appear plain . . . that Apollonius has chosen to make a group rather than an individual, the Argonauts rather than Jason, the central character of the poem' (Carspecken (1952) 110). See also the discussion of this topic by Beye (1982) 77.

²³ On the 'disjunctive narrative' contained in these verses see Goldhill (1991) 290.

ἄλλο μὲν ἐξεσάωσεν ὑπ' ἰλύος, ἄλλο δ' ἔνερθεν
 κάλλιπεν αὐθι πέδιλον ἐνισχόμενον προχοῇσιν.
 ἦκετο δ' ἐς Περίην αὐτοσχεδόν, ἀντιβολήσων
 εἰλαπίνης ἦν πατρὶ Ποσειδάωνι καὶ ἄλλοις
 ῥέζε θεοῖς, Ἥρης δὲ Πελασγίδος οὐκ ἀλέγιζεν.
 Αἶψα δὲ τὸν γ' ἐσιδὼν ἐφράσσατο καὶ οἱ ἄεθλον
 ἔντυε ναυτιλίας πολυκηδέος, ὄφρ' ἐνὶ πόντῳ
 ἦε καὶ ἄλλοδαποῖσι μετ' ἀνδράσι νόστον ὀλέσσει. (1.5–17)

For such was the oracle Pelias heard, that a hateful fate
 awaited him in the future, to be destroyed by the devices of that man
 from among the people whom he should see wearing but one sandal.
 Not long after this, in accordance with your utterance, Jason,
 crossing the stream of wintry Anaurus on foot,
 saved one sandal from the mud, the other
 he left there in the depths, caught up in the flood.
 And forthwith he came to the palace of Pelias to partake
 of the solemn feast which the king was offering to his father Poseidon
 and to the other gods, but he did not honour Pelasgian Hera.
 Quickly the king saw him and understood, and devised for him
 the challenge of a sea voyage full of suffering, so that either at sea
 or among foreign men he might lose his return.

It is a critical commonplace that the role defined for Apollo at the beginning of the *Argonautica* is a twofold one,²⁴ but one needs to be precise as to exactly how and when the plurality is generated. In this regard γάρ in the fifth verse marks an important shift of emphasis in the poem. Up to this point it was feasible to read Ἀρχόμενος σέο, Φοῖβε exclusively as an invocation or hymn to the god of poetry at the outset of Apollonius' poetic endeavours, a reading defined by the main verb μνήσομαι positioned at the beginning of the second verse, marking the introduction of the first-person narrator. It now becomes manifest in verse 5 that the opening phrase of the poem carries a second, more localised meaning, an acknowledgement that the oracle of Apollo is the kinetic event setting in motion the voyage of the *Argo*. The sequence of events introduced by Τοίην γάρ Πελίδης φάτιν ἔκλυεν explains the importance of Apollo's oracle so far as Pelias is concerned, thereby

²⁴ See Albis (1996) 22–6; Beye (1982) 13–14; Collins (1967) 3–10; DeForest (1994) 37; Fränkel (1968) 35; Goldhill (1991) 286–7; Hunter (1993) 120–1; Vian (1974) 3–4; Williams (1991) 297–303.

permitting some perspective upon the reference in verse 3 to the behest of the king. The reader now realises that to begin from Apollo in terms of poetic inspiration is also to begin from Apollo in terms of plot.

As we have seen, the opening verses of the epic specified the itinerary of *Argo* only in terms of an outward voyage. In the middle section of the proem the reason for this becomes apparent, as the initial, simplistic representation of the voyage as a quest in search of the Golden Fleece undergoes severe revision. The focalisation throughout this stage of the narrative is primarily that of Pelias, as is emphasised by three mentions of his name in ten verses (3, 5, 12), and access to the thought processes of the king reveals that, from his viewpoint, the retrieval of the fleece is an irrelevance, the main aim being rather that the Argonauts should embark upon a dangerous journey without hope of return.

Crucially, within this section of the introduction dealing with Pelias' motivation is to be found the merest hint of another, and contrary, divine motivation for the voyage. The detail of Pelias' slighting of Hera prepares us for her perception of the voyage, revealed later on in the poem, as a means of exacting revenge on Pelias for the sacrificial dishonour done to her.²⁵ The expression of Pelias' plan in verses 15–17 is thus prefaced in verse 14 by an ironic pointer to the ultimate outcome of his strategy. It is Pelasgian Hera rather than the man with one sandal whom Pelias should be especially worried about.

Irony accumulates in this section of the introduction. Pelias' alternative plan for the *Argo* voyage resonates with a variety of Odyssean allusions. In the first place, the postulated settings for Jason's destruction, either ἐνὶ πόντῳ (16) or ἄλλοδαποῖσι μετ' ἀνδράσι (17), are analogous to the land and sea settings for Odysseus' wanderings as stated in the *Odyssey* proem. More specifically, the outline of the task which Pelias devises for Jason (οἱ ἄεθλον | ἔντυε ναυτιλίας πολυκηδέος) is reminiscent of Odysseus' description to the Phaeacians of his (still unaccomplished) homecoming as νόστον ἑμὸν πολυκήδεα (*Od.* 9.37), a description which prefaces and summarises the hero's tale

²⁵ See e.g. Beye (1982) 20; Feeney (1986) 58; Levin (1971a) 15–16.

of his wanderings. A third allusive model may be found in Odysseus' comments at the end of his travails, as he speaks to Penelope of their respective sufferings over the previous twenty years:

ὦ γύναι, ἤδη μὲν **πολέων** κεκορήμεθ' **ἀέθλων**
 ἀμφοτέρω, σὺ μὲν ἐνθάδ' ἐμὸν **πολυκηδέα νόστον**
 κλαίουσ'· αὐτὰρ ἐμὲ Ζεὺς ἄλγεσι καὶ θεοὶ ἄλλοι
 ἴεμενον πεδάσσκον ἐμῆς ἀπὸ πατρίδος αἴης. (*Od.* 23.350–3)

Wife, by now we have both had our fill of many trials,
 you here bewailing my troublesome homecoming,
 while myself Zeus and the other gods kept constrained with griefs
 from my native land, though I was eager to reach it.

Major disjunction between the poetic expression of Pelias' intent and the poetic memory it is designed to evoke by means of these allusions is immediately apparent. We already know that the plan of Pelias is intended as an avoidance of an oracular pronouncement, and its very constitution in these terms carries with it the intimation of ultimate failure. Apollonius embellishes the underlying sense of futility inherent in Pelias' stratagem by playing upon audience awareness of the *Odyssey* story. Apollonius' Homeric allusions are clearly intended to communicate the impression to the learned reader that Pelias is concocting some kind of odyssey for Jason, an impression bolstered by the king's sacrifice to Poseidon (13–14). It would seem very pointed indeed that Hera, the goddess exerting a major influence on the favourable outcome of the Argonauts' mission, is slighted in favour of the god whose power hinders Odysseus' return. And yet the great irony in all of this is that the one journey precedent which Pelias would not wish applied to Jason's circumstances is a precedent according to which the hero *does* return.

Notwithstanding the fact that Pelias is deluding himself, and his stratagem is ultimately to be thwarted, the disclosure of his plan does signal a decisive change in the presentation of the *Argo* voyage in these early stages, a change anticipating the preoccupations of the epic as a whole. One need hardly underline the importance of the concluding words of verse 17 (νόστον ὀλέσσει) as the first instance of the journey of the Argonauts being construed as

a *nostos*. At the same time the context is pointedly opposed to that of the *Odyssey* prologue; this is a journey for which failure rather than success is the preferred outcome. Last but not least, the introduction of this theme of *nostos* imports with it a certain amount of expectation; we have seen already that according to the Homeric rubric the twin parameters for the articulation of the epic voyage, namely wandering and return, are inextricably intertwined.

By this stage in the *Argonautica* prologue it may safely be said that our perception of the *Argo* voyage as created by the decisive image of the opening verses is recast; the quest for the Golden Fleece will not, after all, be quite so linear as originally suggested. And there is more. The introduction to the poem concludes with a second, more detailed declaration of content, which only serves to complicate matters still further:²⁶

Νῆα μὲν οὖν οἱ πρόσθεν ἔτι κλείουσιν ἄοιδοι
 Ἄργον Ἀθηναίης καμέειν ὑποθημοσύνησι.
 Νῦν δ' ἂν ἐγὼ γενεήν τε καὶ οὖνομα μυθησαίμην
 ἡρώων δολιχῆς τε πόρους ἄλός ὅσσα τ' ἔρεξαν
 πλαζόμενοι· Μοῦσαι δ' ὑποφήτορες εἶεν ἄοιδῆς. (1.18–22)

The ship, as works of former poets still celebrate,
 was fashioned by Argus under the guidance of Athena.
 For my part I shall now tell of the lineage and names
 of the heroes, and the paths of their long sea-voyage, and what they did
 while wandering; may the Muses be the interpreters of my song.

Although the outline of Pelias' machinations may have appeared to all intents and purposes to be the start of the narrative proper, the immediate consequence of this second declaration of the poem's content is to transform the elaborate account of the king's fear of Jason into something approximating to a digression. This is obvious from the way in which verses 5–17 might easily be elided without any disruption to the sense. Apollonius' authorial consideration in verses 18–22 of the next stage of his narrative is

²⁶ As Williams (1991) 130 n.3 points out, there is a certain symmetry of subject-matter between verses 1–4 (Apollo, heroes, voyage, *Argo*) and 18–22 (*Argo*, heroes, voyage, Muses). See also Hurst (1967) 40; Vian (1974) 3.

not only unexpected, but also introduces (or reopens) the question of how exactly the telling of the tale of the *Argo* voyage may best be compassed. One narrative strategy is immediately rejected by means of *praeteritio*. The poet draws specific attention to his avoidance of the familiar tale of *Argo*'s construction, the implication being that this *topos* is eschewed precisely because of its rehearsal by previous poets. Instead, at the beginning of verse 20 the poet notifies the reader by means of the pointed contrast between Νῦν δ' ἄν ἐγὼ and the earlier οἱ πρόσθεν ἔτι κλείουσιν ἄοιδοι of the adoption of a different narrative strategy, the first element of which is to be an enumeration of the identities and lineage of all the Argonauts (γενεήν τε καὶ οὔνομα μυθησαίμην | ἥρώων, 20–1).

This brings me to perhaps the most difficult issue in the interpretation of the *Argonautica* prologue. Verses 20–2 are fundamental to resolution of the controversy surrounding the overall frame of reference of the poem's introduction. Critical opinion is sharply divided, the principal point of contention being whether the opening of the *Argonautica* is programmatic for the epic as a whole or for books 1 and 2 only.²⁷ Close consideration of these concluding three verses reveals that they are in fact ingeniously constructed to exhibit a gradation of programmatic reference, a sequential expansion of thought reflecting the action of the entire poem in more measured fashion than the opening verses. Apollonius proclaims a threefold subject-matter. The first (γενεήν τε καὶ οὔνομα μυθησαίμην | ἥρώων) we have already understood as introducing the item immediately on the agenda for book 1, the imminent gathering of the heroes. For the next element in his index of contents Apollonius offers a second and far more general gloss of the itinerary of the Argonauts. The specificity and precision of the opening image of the ship's cleaving a way through the clashing rocks is replaced by an ambiguous

²⁷ On the function of verses 1.1–4 see Händel (1954) 10–11, who emphasises their importance as an introduction to the first two books. Also Körte (1929) 179. The relevance of 1.1–4 for the entire poem is stressed by Collins (1967) 13–14; Fränkel (1968) 33–4; Fusillo (1985) 364–5. On the issue of verses 1.18–22, Beye (1982) 36 interprets them as referring only to the first two books, while Fusillo (1985) 366; Paduano and Fusillo (1986) 83; Vian (1974) 3 see them in a wider context.